



UNIT- 1 An Introduction to Counselling

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Differentiate between counselling and guidance
- ✓ Understand the qualities and characteristics of a good counsellor
- ✓ Describe the primary goals of counselling

Unit 1

An Introduction to Counselling

Counselling can be classified as both a science and an art form in its own right. Providing a concise and accurate definition for counselling isn't easy, as it means different things to different people. It is often referred to as a profession of 'helping' in a variety of areas, sought on a short-term basis and based on a combination of theory, experience and interpersonal skills.

For the most part, counselling exists to help individuals from a variety of backgrounds overcome difficulties and resolve challenges in their lives. Counselling can be sought as a means to overcome behavioural issues, emotional difficulties, relationship problems, social challenges and much more besides. As each individual case is different, counselling means something completely different to everyone who seeks it.

There are, however, several common points that apply in all types of counselling, as identified by the American Psychological Association and the American Counselling Association. A few examples of which include the following:

Counselling is a Profession

This means that in order for an individual to offer their services as a counsellor, they must first study the subject at an advanced level and obtain a formal qualification. This could be anything from an advanced diploma to a master's degree or a doctorate, though an appropriate educational background is considered mandatory.

Counsellors focus on Specialist Fields within the Profession

The professional counsellor will only ever offer their services in accordance with their experience, expertise and areas of specialist knowledge. For example, one counsellor may specialise in addiction and rehabilitation counselling, while a second may excel in marriage and relationship counselling. No counsellor should attempt to cover all aspects of the profession, as to do so is to spread yourself far too thinly.

Counselling is conducted with clients within the "Normal Range" Psychologically.

This means that those who are provided with counselling do not suffer from any major or long-term psychological health problems. Counselling and psychiatry are two very different fields that focus on entirely different issues. Counsellors work exclusively with those who are in a healthy or 'normal' psychological state, who simply need help overcoming a short-term and correctable issue.

Counselling is a process that helps make decisions and formulate new ways of behaving, feeling, and thinking...

It's a longstanding misconception, but counsellors are not there to hand their clients easy answers on the proverbial silver platter. Instead, they simply exist to open doors and empower their clients with the confidence and motivation needed to get through them. It is a profession that focuses on enabling change and improvement, through a combination of goal setting and meaningful discussion.

Roughly summarised, you could therefore describe counselling as a structured approach to the resolution of situational and developmental problems that are strictly short-term, and experienced by individuals who are otherwise psychologically healthy.

While it's technically possible for anyone wishing to do so to provide counselling services, the industry as a whole complies with a long list of standardised guidelines and codes of practice for the benefit of those seeking counselling. Formal training may not be a legal requirement to work in some aspects of the profession, but is nonetheless considered mandatory for anyone who wishes to become a credible and successful counsellor.

The Primary Goals of Counselling

Again, the specific goals of any course of counselling will be determined entirely on the basis of the client's situation, requirements and priorities. Nevertheless, five primary objectives (or classifications thereof) govern everything that takes place during the course of counselling.

These five primary goals of counselling are as follows:

Facilitating Behaviour Change

This means providing clients with the support and empowerment they need to make positive behavioural changes. Achieving goals and overcoming issues is almost always about altering your behaviour and your perceptions, which begins with a realistic goal setting.

Promoting Decision Making

As previously mentioned, the counsellor is not there to make decisions on behalf of their clients, nor provide them with easy answers. They are simply there to provide the encouragement and often the emotional outlet the client needs to face up to and make important decisions for their betterment.

Enhancing Coping Skills

Counsellors can also help clients enhance and improve their coping skills, making it easy to deal with difficult situations that may be beyond their control.

Improving Relationships

Counselling often seeks to improve relationships. This refers to the client's relationship to other people, along with the way they see and interpret themselves. Relationship issues can be anything from social anxiety to poor self-esteem to image issues to all types of intimacy issues.

Facilitating the Client's Potential

Ultimately, it is the job of the counsellor to provide the client with the professional support and empowerment needed to enable them to reach their full potential. 'Potential' could refer to achieving ambitious goals and objectives, or turning a corner on negative habits and lifestyle choices.

What's the Difference between Counselling and Guidance?

Counselling and guidance go hand in hand, though the two concepts are inherently different. The biggest

difference being that guidance typically refers to the provision of concrete advice and suggestions on something specific, in accordance with the advanced knowledge and experience of the individual providing it.

A typical example being a careers officer in an educational environment, who may offer students guidance and suggestions on future study or career options. Unlike the counsellor, these individuals use their specialist knowledge and experience to provide direct advice and suggestions to those they support with regard to their options and what they should do.

By contrast, a counsellor would ask a series of questions and discuss the matter as openly and honestly as possible, in order to empower the student to make their own decisions as to what to do next. While it's not to say that counsellors never provide direct guidance, counselling focuses more on changing perspectives and viewpoints to help clients find answers and solutions for themselves.

In addition, guidance will usually be provided when the individual in question is struggling with a decision such as choosing a course, a college or a career. Counselling is sought when the individual in question is struggling with a temporary personal or socio-psychological issue that is causing them trouble.

Guidance can also be provided to a group of people at the same time, whereas counselling is always one-to-one and strictly confidential in nature.

Counselling Concepts

Newcomers to counselling often assume that the process consists primarily of a formal 'question and answer' format, in order to find the answers the client seeks. In reality, successful counselling is all about building a relationship between the two parties, enabling them to work together on the issues the client is facing.

This is why many people make the mistake of assuming that instead of a counsellor, they can simply talk out their issues with a friend or family member. When in reality, the relationship between the client and the counsellor is completely different for a number of reasons:

1. Counsellors are legally and ethically bound by strict confidentiality rules. Under no circumstances must anything the client says or does during any of the sessions be shared with anyone else. Friends and family members cannot necessarily promise the same level of confidentiality.
2. Counsellors are extensively trained and, in most instances, will have spent many years focusing on a specific aspect of counselling. They will have also encountered multiple cases like yours before, enabling them to provide support on a level that exceeds the capabilities of even your closest friends and family members.
3. It can be surprisingly difficult to be completely honest and open with those you care about. Consulting with a counsellor can be much more liberating, as nothing you say will have any repercussions or lead to any potential complications with friends and family members.
4. When consulting with a counsellor, the client understands that it is their time to focus on themselves and themselves alone. When consulting with a friend or family member, a certain amount of reciprocity and empathy is expected on both parts.

5. The counsellor works in accordance with the preferences and schedule of the client, providing them with their complete and undivided attention for the duration of every session. Again, something friends and family members may not be able to guarantee.

The Qualities, Capabilities and Characteristics of the Counsellor

Counselling is one of many professions where success is built on far more than academic achievements and experience alone. You can study the intricacies of counselling at the most advanced level, but you cannot and will not get by without the in-built qualities and characteristics of a good counsellor.

While all counsellors take a slightly different approach to the provision of their services, all good counsellors have the following qualities and capabilities:

- A naturally patient and empathetic attitude
- The desire to build self-esteem in others
- Understanding and respect for information confidentiality
- The ability to provide sincere reassurance
- A natural knack for asking the right questions at the right time
- Tenacity and a willingness to take on challenges cases
- Advanced organisational and time management skills
- Flawless concentration and listening skills
- The ability to conduct difficult affairs with humility
- Confidence that never crosses into arrogance
- An overwhelming desire to help other people

The Counselling Process – How Does it Work?

A set formula for a 'perfect' counselling session doesn't exist, for the simple reason that every client, every session and every interaction is 100% unique. For the most part, counselling provides clients with the opportunity to acknowledge, express and understand thoughts and feelings they may have previously kept hidden.

It's only when we're completely and unashamedly honest with ourselves that we're able to face up to the realities of whatever it is we're feeling and, by extension, what may be holding us back. By providing clients with a safe and completely confidential environment to get their feelings out in the open, that's exactly what tends to happen.

After which, it's a case of providing the client with the support and empowerment needed to make whatever decisions and behavioural changes are necessary to help them achieve their goals.

How Many Appointments Are Typically Necessary?

Most clients attend counselling sessions once a week, but it's not uncommon for sessions to be organised more frequently, or perhaps just once a fortnight. The actual length of the relationship should never be predetermined. Establishing a formal deadline (say 12 weeks) can make it difficult to remain objective, as

both the counsellor and the client are aware that there is a finite amount of time available.

How Much do Counsellors Charge Their Clients?

Counsellors are free to develop their own unique pricing structures, though are advised to do so in accordance with the services being provided by similarly experienced and reputable counsellors in their locality. In any case, it's essential to clarify your fee structure with clients at the earliest possible stage, in order to avoid any possible ambiguity or potential disputes at a later date.

How Long Does It Take Before Counselling Starts 'Working'?

Not only is this an impossible question to answer, it is also a dangerous question to ask. For example, if you were to state that 75% of your clients begin feeling a real difference after five sessions, this could make anyone who needs more than five sessions feel abnormal. It could also motivate clients to restrict themselves to five sessions only, even if they could actually benefit from 10 or 15 sessions.

Some clients feel better after a single initial conversation – others see and feel no real difference for several weeks. Avoid generalisations like these, which can be dangerous for both you as a counsellor and for your clients.

Am I Ready to Offer Professional Counselling?

You've studied counselling at an advanced level, you've enhanced your CV with an endorsed award and you're ready to get to work. But does this actually mean you are 100% ready to begin offering your services as a counsellor?

If any of the following apply, you may not be ready to go into business, or perhaps need to adjust your approach in order to build a successful career:

- You lack genuine drive, passion and motivation
- You feel little enthusiasm to help your clients
- You find your clients' issues boring or annoying
- You're tempted to discuss your work with others
- You feel awkward or uncomfortable consulting with clients
- You lack the confidence to ask honest and open questions
- You act on impulse or emotion at any time
- You're angered by negative comments or feedback

Some of the above – particularly those in relation to confidence – are perfectly normal while getting to grips with the fundamentals of counselling as a newcomer. However, all such issues should be acknowledged and addressed before you begin offering your services to clients in need of your help and support.

Common Counselling Myths and Untruths

It's not unfair or untrue to say that the vast majority of people who have never experienced counselling have a questionable idea as to what the whole thing entails. The result of which is a seemingly endless list of myths and untruths, which can be damaging for counsellors, their clients and the industry as a whole.

Anyone interested in pursuing a career as a counsellor should expect to encounter a wide variety of misconceptions along the way, and therefore should ensure they know the truth behind them.

We'll now be taking a look at some of the most common counselling myths and untruths, which even today continue to paint an inaccurate picture of the industry:

Myth: You have to be 'crazy' to need counseling

Perhaps the most dangerous and devastatingly inaccurate myth of all, counselling is not only for those who are struggling with extreme difficulties in life. More importantly, individuals with genuine psychological illnesses cannot and should not be treated by counsellors, but by psychiatrists and psychologists. Counsellors can provide help and support with an extensive list of behavioural and emotional issues – anything from anxiety to coping with bereavement to confidence issues to addiction and relationship issues. In all instances, early-stage issues 'nipped in the bud' before being allowed to escalate are far easier to address, so counselling should be sought at the earliest possible juncture.

Myth: The role of the counsellor is to give suggestions and advice

While it is not entirely unusual for a counsellor to provide advice on certain issues, their primary role is not to offer direct suggestions. Counsellors are reluctant to provide direct suggestions, as the consequences of doing so could be severe. In addition, counselling is about providing clients with the confidence, motivation, empowerment and open-mindedness needed to make their own decisions. If a counsellor makes decisions on behalf of the client, this isn't counselling.

Myth: Counselling should be sought as a last resort

As previously touched upon, it's actually quite the contrary – counselling should be sought at the earliest possible juncture, rather than waiting for problems to escalate. Think of it in the typical context of a married couple with relationship issues. Option 1 is to seek counselling the moment things become turbulent, in order to identify and work through the issues at an early stage. Option 2 is wait until the only options on the table are counselling or divorce, by which point the relationship has deteriorated so badly it may be impossible to repair.

Myth: Friends and family are ideal counsellors as they know you and care about you

Much as this seems like a logical argument, the opposite is in fact true. The exact reason friends and family cannot provide 'proper' counselling is because they know you and they care about you. They therefore cannot be relied upon to be impartial, objective and honest. Nor is it possible to be as open and honest with a friend or family member as you can be with a counsellor you meet on a purely professional level.

Myth: I won't have anything to say – it will be one long awkward silence

It's often assumed that counsellors simply sit there in silence and wait for their clients to lead the conversation. In reality, professional counsellors are extensively trained in the art of getting their clients to open up. They know how to ask the right questions, when to probe specific issues and how to ensure periods of silence are avoided at all costs. It's never up to the client to keep the conversation moving – this is where the art of effective counselling lies.

Myth: Once you start attending counselling, you cannot stop

Perhaps not literally, though there are some who avoid counselling due to the assumption that it takes too long to achieve viable results. As previously touched upon, the length of time needed for a client to achieve their goals will always be unique. Some feel remarkably different after just a couple of sessions, whereas others need dozens of meetings to achieve the same results.

Myth: It's inevitable that others will find out

Professional counsellors have an ethical and legal obligation to safeguard the confidentiality and privacy of their clients. Under no circumstances are they permitted to discuss anything that took place during any of their sessions with anyone else. Confidentiality rules can only be broken if a counsellor believes a client may pose a direct risk to their own safety or that of anyone else. In all other instances, everything must be kept 100% confidential in accordance with law.

Myth: Relationship counselling is all about assigning blame

Quite the opposite – relationship counselling is actually about mutual understanding and the elimination of 'blame' in the traditional sense. Relationships only work when both parties are equally involved, committed and aware of their own strengths and weaknesses. To assign blame is to tip the balance of the relationship disproportionately in one direction or the other, which almost always does more harm than good.

Myth: Counselling is a miracle cure for all types of issues

Realistically, counselling isn't a 'cure' for anything at all. It's simply a process that facilitates positive life changes and the ability to both acknowledge and overcome obstacles. Clients should never approach counselling under the impression that all of their issues and areas of dissatisfaction in life will suddenly disappear. If this is the case, it is the responsibility of the counsellor to educate them as to what counselling actually entails.

Myth: Counselling costs too much for most people to afford

While it's true to say that counselling costs vary wildly from one provider and region to the next, counselling in general can be surprisingly inexpensive. It can even be provided free of charge on the National Health Service (NHS) in the United Kingdom, or under similar public health plans elsewhere. If a client has health insurance, this may also cover their counselling costs.

Myth: It's impossible to open up to a complete stranger

Many clients worry that they'll be unable to be completely honest and open about important issues with someone they've never met before. When in practice, it's significantly easier to open up to a stranger than someone you have a social or emotional connection with. Clients may understandably feel nervous and demonstrate reluctance to share openly during the first couple of sessions, but this soon gives way to more frank and honest conversation.

Myth: Attending counselling means accepting failure

To accept failure is to give up on whatever it is that's causing problems in your life. To attend counselling is to take a proactive and logical approach to the resolution of the issues you are facing. Hence, it is

nonsensical and completely inaccurate to associate counselling with failure. Just as long as you are making positive attempts to make important changes in your life, you've neither failed nor given up.

Myth: My counsellor will suggest I take medication

This isn't the case at all, for the simple reason that the vast majority of counsellors are not qualified or licensed to write prescriptions. Nor are they equipped to handle the kinds of psychological or physical health issues that would warrant the use of medication. A counsellor may recommend that a client speaks to a doctor or a specialist who may subsequently suggest medication, but is extremely unlikely to make a direct recommendation.

Myth: Counselling is all about focusing on positives

Not at all, as in order to make progress in life it is sometimes necessary to focus attention on the negatives. At least, to such an extent as to confront uncomfortable issues, deal with personal pain and subsequently make positive progress. In the example of an individual struggling to cope with the bereavement of a loved one, it could simply be that they have not yet allowed themselves to grieve appropriately. In which case, all the positive thinking in the world isn't going to help them – it needs to be confronted head-on.

Myth: Counsellors force you to discuss uncomfortable subjects

While it's the job of the counsellor to encourage honest and open discussion, they also understand the importance of comfort and discretion. In any instance where a client is clearly uncomfortable or unwilling to discuss a difficult subject, a good counsellor will never try to force them to do so. They may attempt to revisit the topic at a later date to see if the client is willing to discuss it, but will never apply pressure of any kind in such instances.

Myth: Counsellors care more about the money than their clients

The simple fact of the matter is that if you don't care deeply for the wellbeing of the clients you work with, you will not succeed as a counsellor. Getting into counselling purely for the money is a fruitless endeavour and a waste of time. You cannot and will not succeed if you're more concerned with the cash you collect than the clients you work with. Hence, every successful counsellor is far more interested in their clients than the financial aspects of the job.

Myth: Counselling is best suited to a specific gender or age group

Statistically speaking, men are more likely to seek counselling than women. Something psychologists have attributed to the fact that women typically have better control over their emotions than men. But this doesn't mean that counselling is best suited to one specific gender or age group. Personal and emotional problems don't discriminate in terms of who they affect, meaning anyone with obstacles to overcome could benefit from counselling.

Myth: You have to sign up for a long-term course

Some counsellors place excessively heavy emphasis on long-term agreements and binding contracts. These are the counsellors that typically prioritise financial gain over their clients' best interests. Elsewhere, the more professional and responsible counsellor provides the client with complete freedom of choice. If they

want to sign up for just one or two sessions to see how things work, there should be no pressure to agree to a longer course. Nor should the counsellor ever suggest immediately after meeting a new client that they need a specific number of sessions to reach their goals.

When Should an Individual Seek Counselling?

Technically speaking, counselling can prove helpful when facing almost any short-term issue or obstacle to overcome. Be it emotional, social, professional or personal, counselling is technically limitless in scope. Just a few of the most common problems brought the way of counsellors by clients of all ages include the following:

- Trouble getting ahead at work
- Problems with stress or anxiety
- Difficulties dealing with bereavement
- Parental separation issues
- Academic performance problems
- All types of major life transitions
- Feelings of loneliness or isolation
- Intimacy and relationship issues
- Problems with social relationships
- Sexual orientation confusion
- Depression and general apathy
- Concerns regarding substance abuse
- The inability to make decisions
- Uncontrollable anger
- Low self-esteem or lack of confidence
- Conflicts with family or friends
- Career dissatisfaction
- Concerns regarding abusive relationships
- Worries about the future
- Panic attacks and paranoia
- Addictive or habitual behaviours
- Eating disorders and body confidence issues
- Questions or concerns regarding pregnancy
- Difficulties coping as a new parent

These are just some of the everyday issues that prompt clients of all ages to seek counselling. Problems which in most instances tend to be overlooked or ignored by clients until they reach an advanced stage, before the decision is made to confront them.

Unfortunately, there is nothing the counsellor can do to encourage clients to contact them when the issues they're facing are at a relatively early stage. Usually, by the time the client makes contact with a counsellor,

things have already escalated and become difficult to cope with.

Counselling with no Immediately Identifiable Issue

Some of the most challenging (though undeniably interesting) cases the counsellor encounters are those clients who cannot pinpoint their issues or obstacles. Many people seek counselling with no specific objective or issue in mind – they simply feel dissatisfied with the way their life is going.

In such cases, it's the job of the counsellor to encourage the kind of open discourse needed to identify the root cause of the issue. Working with clients who have no idea what they want isn't easy, but is nonetheless an everyday standard for the professional counsellor.

When is Counselling Considered Necessary?

Each of the instances outlined above refers to an issue where an individual may benefit from counselling. Though technically optional, professional counselling could prove enormously beneficial for anyone experiencing these common concerns.

However, there are also instances where counselling should be considered mandatory, rather than optional. It's one thing to allow minor personal grievances and obstacles to hold you back, but it's something else entirely to let your life be controlled or spoiled entirely by something correctable.

This is why, according to the world's leading counselling authorities, counselling should be considered 100% necessary by anyone affected by any of the following:

- A state of permanent anger or irritation
- Constant mood swings and lack of emotional control
- Living with extreme anxiety or paranoia
- The total inability to trust other people
- A dangerous lack of self confidence
- The inability to make any decisions whatsoever
- Feelings of resentment for life in general
- Daily difficulties finding motivation
- Uncontrollable fear in social situations
- Ongoing isolation and loneliness
- Excessive or disproportionate jealousy
- Inexplicable feelings of worthlessness

It's worth noting that in all of these cases, the issues the individual is facing may be attributed to a longer-term psychological health issue. In which case, they may need to be referred to an appropriate specialist for a more detailed diagnosis.

However, counselling is typically recommended as the first port of call for anyone struggling to cope with issues such as these. It may represent the first of many steps on the road to improved wellbeing, but is by far the more important step of the entire journey.

Further Reading:

- ✓ *Introduction to Counseling: Voices from the Field* by Jeffrey A. Kottler and David S. Shepard | Mar 4, 2019
- ✓ *Introduction to Counseling: An Art and Science Perspective* by Michael S. Nystul | Aug 13, 2019